

Spring 5-1-2012

Putting Lipstick on a Sculpture

Kelly A. O'Brien
Georgia State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/art_design_theses

Recommended Citation

O'Brien, Kelly A., "Putting Lipstick on a Sculpture." Thesis, Georgia State University, 2012.
https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/art_design_theses/107

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Ernest G. Welch School of Art and Design at ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Art and Design Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gsu.edu.

PUTTING LIPSTICK ON A SCULPTURE

by

KELLY O'BRIEN

Under the Direction of Christina West

ABSTRACT

Putting Lipstick on a Sculpture is a mixed body of sculptural and two-dimensional work investigating our society's superficial expectations of beauty. The glitzy covers of glitter and spandex are used over more traditional structural materials to confuse the viewer's expectations, much like labels categorizing usual fine art. The sculptures are on display for the audience's aesthetic judgments, while paintings blur lines of what is classified as traditional and acceptable for emphasis.

INDEX WORDS: Glitz, Sculpture, Painting, Art, Judgmental, Plywood, Spandex, Glitter, Beauty, Grotesque, Superficial, Cheap, Display, Culture, Jurassic, Appearance, Pageant, Philosophy, Aesthetics, Expectations, Gaudy, Standards, Distinctions, Blob

PUTTING LIPSTICK ON A SCULPTURE

by

KELLY O'BRIEN

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Level and Degree Title

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2012

Copyright by
Kelly O'Brien
2012

PUTTING LIPSTICK ON A SCULPTURE

by

KELLY O'BRIEN

Committee Chair: Christina West

Committee: Craig Drennen

Ruth Stanford

Michael Wsol

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

May 2012

DEDICATION

This is made entirely possible due to my father and mother, who overly judged my brain, not my appearance.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Sean, thanks for keeping it real growing up. Someone had to keep me in check.

Brian, thanks for putting up with me, you have a choice unlike my poor family. I am a better sculptor because of the construction skills you have taught me.

Christina, thank you for all the outside hours of help and editing, whether school assigned or personal. I wouldn't be as far as I am today without your guidance.

Ruth, Mike and Craig, thanks for the encouragement. The support I've had from my thesis committee has kept me motivated and enthusiastic, and I have sculptures made as a result of specific comments from each one of you.

I would also like to acknowledge Josh Smith and Jenene Nagy. The year that we worked together at Georgia State was my most transformative and important, largely thanks to the two of you. Josh, thank you for the casual studio critiques that often pushed me out of comfort zones into new and exciting work, and Jenene for being brutally honest, causing me to bring glitter back into my sculptures.

Last, but certainly furthest from least, thank you Mom and Dad. You have undoubtedly supported me in my dream-come-true of pursuing a life of an artist, always believing I have what it takes to succeed, causing me to believe it as well.

Thanks, y'all

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
LIST OF FIGURES.....	vii
THESIS STATEMENT.....	1
ARTISTIC DEVELOPMENT.....	2
INFLUENCES.....	8
THESIS WORK.....	15
SUMMATION.....	22
REFERENCE LIST.....	41

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1 Museum of Jurassic Technology: <i>Mice on Toast</i>	25
FIGURE 2 Kelly O'Brien: <i>Self Portrait as Jackalope</i>	26
FIGURE 3 Louise Bourgeois: <i>The Fabric Works</i>	27
FIGURE 4 Kelly O'Brien: <i>Mounted Fancy Calf</i>	28
FIGURE 5 Mitzi Pederson: <i>yellow and orange</i>	29
FIGURE 6 Angela de la Cruz: <i>Larger Than Life</i>	30
FIGURE 7 The Learning Chanel: <i>Toddlers & Tiaras</i>	31
FIGURE 8 Kelly O'Brien: <i>Awkward Glitz</i>	32
FIGURE 9 Kelly O'Brien: <i>Purple Portrait</i>	33
FIGURE 10 Kelly O'Brien: <i>Sculpture to Painting Blob Prop</i>	34
FIGURE 11 Kelly O'Brien: <i>Tube Top Glitz</i>	35
FIGURE 12 Kelly O'Brien: <i>Group Glitz</i>	36
FIGURE 13 Kelly O'Brien: <i>Purple Blob Prop</i>	37
FIGURE 14 Kelly O'Brien: <i>Purple Glitz</i>	38
FIGURE 15 Kelly O'Brien: <i>Leaking Blob Prop</i>	39
FIGURE 16 Kelly O'Brien: <i>Sucked-in Paint</i>	40

The Learner must be led always from familiar objects toward the unfamiliar, guided along, as it were, a chain of flowers into the mysteries of life.

–Charles Wilson Peale,
Quoted in the introductory text of
The Museum of Jurassic Technology

1. THESIS STATEMENT

Defining beauty is complex. I have an untamed curiosity about the uncertain qualities that are assigned to things classified under “beautiful”. This definition comes with expectations that can easily be generalized, but to whose standards? The inherently variable nature of what is beautiful stretches past women and into the gallery; familiar roles are cast upon mediums and how they function to make up a whole work of art.

If defining beauty is complex so is defining sculpture. This material-dictated investigation hinges on the careful consideration of the fragile lines that separate beautiful from grotesque, sculpture from painting. Gaudy aesthetic cues are borrowed from the extreme spectacle of pageantry, and traditions in art history are simultaneously played up to examine the classifications of sculpture versus painting. My curiosity lies in opposites that share similar qualities. Lines are blurred upon attempt at definition, in which the viewer begins to question his/her expectations. Cheap becomes classy, bland becomes bright, bulge become gaunt, and all is turned inside out again. The glitzy covers of glitter and spandex are used over more traditional structural materials to confuse the viewer’s expectations, much like labels categorizing usual fine art. The

sculptures are on display for the audience's aesthetic judgments, while paintings blur lines of what is classified as traditional and acceptable for emphasis.

2. ARTISTIC DEVELOPMENT

2a. BACKGROUND/STATE OF THE ART

Convincing people of things, anything really, has always been an interest of mine. To convince someone of a falsehood is more entertaining than revealing actual facts, even if they are unusual. This may clarify a personal affinity I have for a particular creature, the jackalope. This cryptozoological phenomenon lends itself wonderfully to the ability to convince people of something fake since it is already so widely known, but so narrowly known about. Testing people's expectations that they have grown to feel comfort in, leads me to push the boundaries of what is presumably anticipated in medium specifications.

Luckily, while making these realizations about my fascination with mythical creatures and trickery, I made a trip out to Culver City, California and was taken to a small museum. Having never heard of the Museum of Jurassic Technology before, I had no idea of what to expect besides the fact that it sounded science-based and was definitely not the art gallery visit that I had requested of my host. Walking through the sequentially controlled hallways, I was amazed at how incredible some of these science "facts" were, among other much more mundane artifacts. The displays were beautifully crafted, but information accompanying

them were drawn out and rather dull. As I sat through a long video about bats in its entirety, I realized at the end when they mentioned the animal's ability to fly through walls due to its piercing scream, that this was a hoax. I understand that I am not the most scientifically inclined individual, but I thought that I might have heard about this fantastic "fact" before. With my newfound suspicion, I retraced my steps back through the hallways and discovered that what I had been glossing over had taken full advantage of museum viewer's tendencies to do just that. The majority of the artifacts and information had been fully fabricated, mixed in with hints of truth here and there, to keep the uninvolved viewer strung along in a false educational experience. The farther the visitors walked through the exhibits, the more ridiculous the "facts" became.

Upon my awareness of this trick, I was overwhelmed with profound respect for the cleverness that went into such an endeavor as elaborate as building a whole museum dedicated to deceptive facade, to only later realize it had been funded through a MacArthur Genius Grant. Publically advertised as an educational institution (dedicated to the advancement of knowledge), it claims to house "bizarre relics" from the *lower Jurassic* period (Figure 1).

After my introduction to this museum and its sarcastic presentation of art, I began thinking of the role of historic museums versus art galleries. It is a generalization, but a popular one, that if an object is housed in a museum then it should be regarded as fact, and if it is in a gallery then it should be questioned immediately. This reaches into the art world even deeper, when it is taken into

consideration that there exist specified museums solely dedicated to art collections, as well as galleries. In *On the Museum's Ruins*, Douglas Crimp presents a "...critique of the museum [that] provides a useful analysis of what might be called a discourse on the objects of knowledge." Crimp states,

"It wrests its objects from their original historical contexts not as an act of political commemoration but in order to create the illusion of universal knowledge. By displaying the products of particular histories in a reified historical continuum, the museum fetishizes them, which, as [Walter] Benjamin says, 'may well increase the burden of the treasures that are piled up on humanity's back. But it does not give mankind the strength to shake them off, so as to get its hands on them.'" ¹

I was interested in the presentation that the Museum of Jurassic Technology had exploited to trick its viewers, and attempted this technique in my own early artwork (Figure 2). *Self Portrait as Jackalope* was realized as a relic instead of a sculpture object. By using prosthetic special effects makeup and mold making skills, I wanted to give the viewer a glimpse of what would happen if we evolved into jackalopes, and then died. A gory stretch, but it was a start, and certainly a breakthrough in my conceptual development.

2b. EARLY MATERIAL DEVELOPMENT

Beginning my studio practice in traditional oil painting, I have been trained early on in the most direct, common applications of the media I was working within. Having been trained for sculpture in a metal shop, it was only a matter of time before curiosity set in to explore foreign materials and techniques, and much later on in my career have this expansion in my painting practice. This trip to The

¹ Crimp, Douglas. "This is Not a Museum of Art." In *On the Museum's Ruins*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993. p 204

Museum of Jurassic Technology marked the transition in material change. Thankfully, in my simplistic thought of rebelling with a material different from metal, I began creating soft sculptures. How clever of me, the opposite of hard metal is soft fabric. As elementary of a concept as this breakthrough turned out to be, it is one that has molded my career in one that is more inquisitive. Metal had such strong, solid roots as the favored historical medium for sculpture. Soft sculpture, on the other hand, had much more potential for me to explore my malleable ideas. I have always moved through ideas quickly, as if always asking questions faster than I can try to present myself answers to them, and sewing was a speedier way to get ideas out into my physical world for further examination. I looked to artists who had seamlessly made this transition in art history, and found relevance in the soft sculptures of Louise Bourgeois (Figure 3). Bourgeois ability to use these drastically different materials to explore similar conceptual investigations was a tried and trusted guide towards my on material concerns. Along with the material likeness, Bourgeois' formal ambiguity to confuse the viewer spoke to me,

“...its elements are unsettling: flesh-coloured forms hanging within a wire mesh resemble body parts – perhaps breasts or uteri or male genitalia – without being clear precisely which. Such suggestive ambiguity is typical of Bourgeois's sculptures, enabling one thing to slip into and signify another, disturbing the viewers' conceptions.”²

² Celant, Germano. Hauser & Wirth Gallery, introduction to “Louise Bourgeois: The Fabric Works,” *Hauser & Worth London*, October 15- December 18, 2010, <http://www.hauserwirth.com/exhibitions/743/louise-bourgeois-the-fabric-works/view/>

When the switch from hard to soft sculpture occurred, the shift in my thinking about content of my work drastically turned as well. While working in metal, with traditional casting methods, that of which involves slow, process driven labor, I found that the concepts my work had been revolving around had been much more serious than what my stuffed work became. As I loosened up my technical construction of the work, I found myself having more fun with the ideas my work stemmed from. I thought about what I was attracted to in other people's work, and wondered why I hadn't been using those qualities in my own. This realization brought me back to the jackalope. Recalling the excitement from the challenges that arose from trying to convince people in the existence of mythological creatures, made me anxious to mimic this trickery in my sculpture (Figure 4).

Throughout this sculptural development and even dating before its beginnings, I have been painting oil portraits. I am extremely attracted to painting flesh, and in turn have chosen to paint people posing in a manner of a traditional portrait. I had been working on separate bodies of work, always a series of oil portraits along with a different body of sculptural work. I had always been eager to combine them, but because of this strong desire, I felt that whatever developed from the merge would appear to be entirely too forced. Recently, I became discouraged and on the verge of dropping this hope of ever successfully marrying the two media together. After several critical discussions, I was advised to ask myself what makes me so interested in constantly revisiting oil portraiture. I was

told that I needed to unlock why I always ended up going back to depicting people, since after all, they are not particularly interesting, only when they contribute to the concept.

2c. RECENT MATERIAL DEVELOPMENT

Since gradually moving on from the soft sculpture creatures that propelled me from my undergraduate career into my MFA program, I have not yet abandoned the desire to incorporate my favorite qualities of painting into my sculptures. The discovery of certain working artists who successfully display my concerns I have about medium expectations has heavily changed the direction of my work through appropriately simplified material choices. I have recently found that the properties of painting that I am after are heavily process driven. I like mixing unnatural, uncanny colors to create perfect flesh tones, and then applying the buttery substance to a surface with a meditative technique. These are the qualities that I love and continuously draw me back towards painting, and these very qualities are the opposite reasons as to why I love and also need sculpture.

Sculpture is a physically involved process that requires problem solving and sweat. I need these moments of excitement and frustration, just as badly as I need my Zen-like breaks found in my painting studio. Since I need both of these processes to be complete, and it only follows suit that my artwork in turn needs both to be complete as well.

3. INFLUENCES

3a. ARTIST INFLUENCES

My influences are drawn from sculpture, painting, and art philosophy/theory. I have found extraordinary value in the artists' work separately, but my personal work has thrived from the combination of main ideas borrowed and melded into my own interests. In addition, influences from a mid-western taste of appearance-based beauty show through in my material representations of glitz and glam with glitter and spandex.

Sculptor Mitzi Pederson uses subtle glimpses of glitter and shiny cellophane to treat the viewer in otherwise overlooked places to provide a treat for the viewer. In the work *yellow and orange* (Figure 5), Pederson combines extreme materials in extraordinary ways; marrying cinderblocks with cellophane is unsuspected and rewarding. Her sensitivity to materials, and creation of straightforward visual experiences as rewards, are often achieved by enhancing "flaws". For example, it is intriguing how a connection made with tape, has been exaggerated rather than hidden with shiny aluminum foil tape. Similar to my interest in rewards obtained from viewing a piece, Pederson highlights what she considers mistakes, and brings attention to that which typically goes unnoticed. She calls this "practicing aspects of consideration."³ Pederson's careful consideration of material qualities and powerful minimal compositions leave the

³ Hoffmann, Jens. "Mitzi Pederson." In *Vitamin 3-D: New Perspectives in Sculpture and Installation*, edited by Trevor Schoonmaker and Anne Ellegood, 220-223. New York, NY: Phaidon Press Inc., 2009. p 220

viewer in awe. Pederson also uses a sophisticated application of bold bright colors, and even moments of glitter. Pederson's success is in her straightforward presentation, combined with a penetrating clear concept. The exaggeration of flaws, pushed to the extreme creates something extraordinary out of the otherwise mundane material connection.

Non-traditional painter Angela de la Cruz dramatically blurs the line between painting and sculpture (Figure 6), by virtually destroying her boldly colored canvases and frames and allowing the remaining materials to be displayed as pure form. De la Cruz is an influence in her skill of delivering a concise concept in the most direct fashion possible. These forms act as evidence for the break that has happened from one fine arts classification into the other, leaving painting and entering sculpture. De la Cruz's work transcends from painting into the realm of sculpture by introducing flat, glossy color fields, and transforming canvases into three-dimensions as battered victims crumpled into forms. The absence of an image helps bring the forms into sculpture. The mangled canvas is transformed into an elegant form because of her careful consideration for formal elements of composition in a sculptural sense, and this realization has shown me that a sculpture should do more than sit atop a pedestal. A pedestal, or base, should have equal amount of consideration to the work it is supporting, in more than just a physical relationship.

The physical relationship established between a sculptural form and the base that supports it must be carried through to the physical relationship of that

piece as a whole and the viewer's distance from it. Sculptor Robert Morris highlights the conceptual relevance of the physical space between the viewer and the artwork in an *ARTFORUM* article entitled, "Aligned With Nazca." What Morris is indirectly observing is the importance of the environment in which an artwork resides. The context of the work has gained hierarchy in contemporary sculpture, and visual perspectives affect the meanings embodied in the work. Morris describes space more in terms of a material sense, rather than the physical area the object is in. The space should be considered as conceptual language with equal weight to, or even more than other material choices. He brings up the common contextual scenario of "the confining rectilinear room, ... where the details of the work are never out of focus." This is a challenge (or benefit) that I struggle with frequently, to learn the appropriate balance of this Cartesian battle Morris refers to, the object versus the idea of the self in the shared space. Morris states, "Our encounter with objects in space forces us to reflect on our selves"⁴ in a way that makes me assume he is having a bit of an existentialist crisis. He likens this dilemma to art in the form of a metaphorical labyrinth, continuous wandering in the search for the self. Our role, or function, as the perceivers provides a setting for an object to relate to other objects, or us. A sculpture requires a "unique cooperation with its site" to not only be acknowledged, but heavily considered as a conceptual tool for optimal perception.

⁴ Morris, Robert. "Aligned with Nazca." *ARTFORUM* 14, no. 2, (October 1975): 26-39 p 36

3b. PHILOSOPHICAL INFLUENCES

The main concerns that I am currently trying to unravel through this series can be traced back to similar questions in historical philosophy. In Plato's Republic, X, the *Divided Line theory* is introduced, and examines not only levels of reality that can be easily translated into fine art analogies, but also an overall idea of "the good", which has comparatively strong linear characteristics when compared to beauty.

To put it simply, Plato's *Divided Line theory* is a breakdown of what is the most "real" and what is the least "real", described in his Theory of Forms. He refers to true knowledge, which is the knowledge of the forms in the Greek term *eidos*, which we can understand as a fundamental reality. This begins with the intelligible realm (known through reason) and trickles into the visible world (known through the senses), which can roughly be translated into forms, to visible objects, to (in our example) art. More specifically, the list from most reason down to least reason is as follows: *eidos* (forms), then abstract laws/principles in math, then objects/particular instances, and then lastly shadows/ reflections. Imitative, or representational art moves away from the intelligible realm into the visible, making it move in the wrong direction of reason, or truth. Reason is what philosophy is after, so in turn we are after the form, idea, or essence. Representational art, think of an oil portrait for example, is rejected as true knowledge since it is merely an imitation of visible objects, instances of what the form is. Abstract art does not move in the wrong direction

like imitative art does. Abstract art is inventing something new, new forms, new true knowledge.

While inventing new forms has come natural for me in my sculptural practice, painting has presented itself as a challenge. To create an abstract form in a two-dimensional realm may seem as if it is breaking into the true form level that is important, but I still must wonder if it is still a representation by its confines of a single plane in space. If something cannot break into a third-dimension on its own, can it be considered true? I want to make my sculptures seamless vehicles that serve as a platform for the paint to dive into another dimension, while still retaining the qualities I consider to be beautiful in oil portraiture.

As I stated previously, trying to define beauty is problematic, but Plato touches on this concept as well. Although beauty is typically considered to be physical attractiveness, it is too subjective to come to a stable agreement. This issue is comparable to the philosophical dilemma of standardizing “the good” in terms of true knowledge of forms. To sustain morality amongst a society, the principles of wrong versus right, or “the good” must be established for parameters. But how can a word that means something different to any given person be made into a rule? The same is true with the concept of beauty. While one person may think that a large nose is attractive, another may be turned off by the same attribute. Receding hairlines during the Elizabethan era were considered attractive and desirable, whereas if that were a characteristic of a woman today, she would go to great and painful lengths to hide or reverse it.

Since there is no possible way to set a standard of beauty to abide by, then there is no truth to beauty, only preferences. Although we know that beauty is abstract, our culture has guidelines to classify beautiful people. Women are subjected to these guidelines more readily/strictly than men.

Resistance to this theory stems up through our current state. Not only does our culture carry assumed expectations towards beauty, but also it allows organized outlets, or as participants call it, “sport”, for judging beauty. If this pageantry is examined through the Platonic ideals established in support of impossible standardization, these contests of objectification could only be classified as a strange perversion allowed by our society.

3c. CULTURAL INFLUENCES

Beauty is often immediately associated with appearances in our culture. The superficial beauty that many Americans hold to such high importance is exaggerated in pageants (Figure 7). The competition between girls in “high glitz” pageants showcases the most extreme aspects of this aesthetic obsession. Girls are judged and awarded according to how close they have come to the established standards of beauty. They strut down a runway, for their looks to be scrutinized, and the most beautiful glitzy girl will be crowned the winner. These standards are based on “high glitz,” which refers to sparkling glitter costumes and make-up.

“On any given weekend, on stages across the country, little girls and boys parade around wearing makeup, false eyelashes, spray tans and fake hair to be judged on their beauty, personality and costumes. *Toddlers and*

Tiaras follows families on their quest for sparkly crowns, big titles, and lots of cash.”⁵

These pageants teach girls to be competitive with one another solely based on appearance.

As the pageantry examples are an exaggerated example of aesthetic judgments, it only makes a tiny fraction of our culture. Although most of the Western world is not involved in this spectacle that attempts to standardize beauty, many conform to the underlying expectations of what classifies a woman as sexy. This stereotypical attitude is not only found in our culture’s view of women, but aesthetics in general. Thinking of these generalized expectations of beauty towards women directly relates to general ideas of what can be considered acceptable in fine art.

As a sculptor conversing with an average person who is not involved in the exclusive world of art, it is not unlikely to be asked if I make bronze statues. Sculpture is monumental, seamless, and expensive. Honing in more specifically to a student in art school, one begins to understand sculpture’s further reach, pulling sound, light, video, and performance for example, under its umbrella. This same problem occurs in the field of painting as well. The canvas or panel is bound by the stretcher and frame, and occupies a dedicated two-dimensional space on the wall. Perhaps it takes a certain level of mastery in these studies to understand that it is not until these standards can be exploited, to blur

⁵ “About Toddlers & Tiaras.” Publicity for *Toddlers & Tiaras*, Discovery Communications, LLC., <http://tlc.howstuffworks.com/tv/toddlers-tiaras/about-toddlers-and-tiaras.htm>

expectations and change how people classify high art. This mastery acts as validation for the viewer's assurance that we know what we have done that creates importance and begs consideration, instead of simply being dismissed as a lucky accident. These general expectations that our culture has adopted towards not only beauty, but also categories and materials of conceptual art have pushed me into what I have been examining and experimenting with in my thesis work.

The presumptions that accompany classifying characteristics in the concentrations of sculpture and painting, for example, I will use as my focal point to abstract into formal emphasis of my hybrid work. These ideas of what constitutes a sculpture versus a painting have been physically exaggerated and highlighted in this new work. Instead of trying to build a sculpture that imitates an awkward creature walking (Figure 8), or a painting that is a copy of disguised person all "dolled up" (Figure 9), I am showcasing the qualities in which make up these categories of art in general. Why depict something ugly that already exists, when the idea could be portrayed in a much clearer light if it were the beginning source of information in itself?

4. THESIS WORK

4a. MATERIAL CONTENT

The materials that I have included in this body of work have been heavily influenced by the sculptures of Mitzi Pederson mixed with the rebellious

movements beyond the stretcher by Angela de la Cruz. With the realization of how important the connection between these artists' main concerns were for my own work, I saw in change in my understanding of categories and material classifications in art. De la Cruz's redefinition of what a painting is, Pederson's attention to clever connections through details, and Morris' careful consideration to the viewer's role in the work had mentally merged together in me to form a fresh direction. A new outlook on how I had previously been separating my work made me realized it had all been arbitrary. The subjects no longer needed to be independent from one another; I would instead embrace their characterizing qualities to make a more unique hybrid type of work.

While blurring categorical definitions, inspiration for material decisions must take their cue from something intriguing as well. A grown woman adjusts her tube top, excess weight stretching through tight spandex, while nagging her toddler in full make-up. The mysteries that our culture presents to me through hypocritical situations provoke questions about stereotypical oppositions in fine art genres. I am prodding the classifications of dimensions and history in attempt at clarity where probably none lies. Everyone has their own taste when it comes down to what leggings to wear under their short shorts, so why should there be a standard for art categories? I can only aim to baffle viewer's expectations, as they have towards mine.

Investigations into art history classifications and interesting fashion reflections of society's beauty priority have merged together to create my current

body of work, *Putting Lipstick on a Sculpture*. Sculptures are not only testing out what it feels like to be a painting, but my works' clothing is getting as skimpy as my distinctions between fine art categories themselves. *Sculpture to Painting Blob Prop* (Figure 10) creeps up the wall, with fabric color choices determined by women's nylons and spandex outfits advertised to girls my own age, while the oil paint is a palette of gaudy cosmetics. Works that stem in the reverse, originating as a painting but borrowing formal elements from sculpture also make fashion faux pas, such as *Tube Top Glitz* (Figure 11). Strong reference to the history of painting is represented here, with fabric taught around a wooden stretcher, yet sculptural stuffing and layers are tucked back with cheap florescent duct tape, directly next to our trusted oil paint. Playing with alternative materials such as spandex, glitter and tape in the same breath as traditional ones like oils, wooden structures and fiberglass guide compositional decisions in accordance to assigned hierarchies for each specific piece.

4b. FORMAL DECISIONS

Material and compositional choices are led by my curiosity in the differences between beauty and grotesque. Cheap and classy are strongly considered here as well. Opposing characteristics that often share similar qualities are confusing enough to make an entire body of work out of. I find instances where I am struggling to balance these opposite with each other, while also trying to represent their most exaggerated sides within a single piece.

Referencing Plato's Theory of Forms helps support artistic inclination towards honesty in material for me. A stable theory that is trusted as this one can provide comfort for a viewer when seeing materials such as raw tape propping up components of my work. I believe there is a place for disguising materials and tricking the viewer on a formal level, and I appreciate the skill it takes to successfully accomplish this; however, my work calls for honesty in media as necessity since it plays into a commentary on a portion of our society that is so quick to put themselves out into the public eye, no matter how degrading it is as a representation of America.

The physical state of this work revolves around the ability to disassemble and move them with ease. With this demonstration of "a profound mistrust of permanence", I liken my state of mind with the current exhibit at the New Museum, NY, *The Ungovernables*. This collection of artists were all born within the same time period as I, and critics have deemed this group of my peers with this classification, a strong reflection of what is happening in the moment. I reinforce this tendency with techniques such as directly taping to the wall and fabric itself, a less-than-permanent solution to holding parts in their places for any extended amounts of time. In Eungie Joo's description of a work entitled *Positions*, a choreographed protest by the group Public Movement, I found inspirational relevance; "...The public is asked to choose between two seemingly

oppositional ideas and stand with others on the side of their choice.”⁶ The incorporation of the term “seemingly oppositional” is intriguing to my interests in opposites that share similar qualities, while the idea of having to choose sides with no middle option is anxiously permanent.

4c. STAGE PRESENCE VS. STAGE PROPS

The sculptural earlier, original components of *Putting Lipstick on a Sculpture* are categorized by what type of entity the object is mimicking. This can roughly be broken down into three groups, the “beings” (Figure 12), the “blob props” (Figure 13), and the models that embody these two ideas into one, which will make up the a full-scale scene, also known as the gallery set-up.

In the compositional arrangement of the gallery, decisions regarding placement of the pieces are assisted by stereotypical assignments of whether or not a work takes a role as a leading presence (as I refer to as “glitz”) or a supporting prop (usually called a “blob prop”). This arbitrary system will act purely as a visual aid, helping the formal elements of design guide the flow of the work with one another, without disrupting the conceptual hierarchy between then work. For instance, just because a sculpture is on the floor and perhaps in a non-predominant part of the gallery, bears no weight as to how important it is in the conceptual realm. That piece down there (Figure 14) is actually incredibly significant in the development of my paintings. This piece marks the turning point where I have learned that the wooden structure under the taught fabric acts as a

⁶ Joo, Eungie. “The Ungovernables.” *The Ungovernables: 2012 New Museum Triennial, February 15-April 22, 2012*, New York, NY: Skira Rizzoli Publications, Inc., 2012. p 15

total disregard for the use of a stretcher for the painted flat surfaces, blurring the distinctions between the categorical classifications of painting and sculpture.

4d. CONCEPTUAL CONTENT

The strange, judgmental tone of a pageant is something that I want to borrow as a context for the display of my sculpture. I want my work to mimic contestants walking down the runway, with their glitter shimmering under the spotlight. For this technique, the innovative approach de la Cruz uses has been influential to my sculptural decision-making processes. The mangled canvas is transformed into an elegant form because of her careful consideration to formal elements of composition in a sculptural sense, and this realization has shown me that a sculpture should do more than sit atop a pedestal. The fluid incorporation of the “pedestal” has become a very important element for consideration for decisions made about my own sculptures; the sculptures are elevated by means of their form.

Morris’s interpretation of the spatial relationship resonates through to my work when I consider the importance of details versus the whole. Forcing the object into the corner as opposed to in the center of an open area of a rectilinear white gallery space will change a piece’s context immensely. My work is to be considered in human scale. Presenting “life-size” forms within the space that the viewer occupies, asks a person to think of the work as a being, rather than just an object. This allows comparisons to the body, as well as deeper judgments

concerning beauty. Gaudy details become prominent, but the option to mentally rest in the bulbous forms as a whole is also included as a retreat.

My sculptures strike a pose for the viewer in a manner similar to the pauses a pageant contestant would take to let the judges get an adequate look for their following superficial review. The difference is that my sculptures remain in this position, for deeper contemplation and understanding on the part of the audience, whereas the girls on display are not. This configuration is a simplified presentation of a runway in a pageantry show.

The floor sculptures that resemble props and begin to reference painting (Figure 15), and the “paintings” (Figure 16) on the walls themselves, start to delve deeper into our culture’s overall beliefs of what is attractively acceptable. For these pieces, which I classify separately from the works that I call sculpture, I think it is more important for conceptual impact to go beyond the small, isolated instances of awkwardness and “beauty” in the world of pageants, and broaden the scope of conversation to reach for an more universal dichotomy of beauty and disgust. Pageantry fashion highlights the slippery edge between beauty and gaudiness I find fascinating, but does not resonate strongly enough into the overall issues that I am exploring about our culture’s perception of aesthetic in general. Through this research, I have been left with this curiosity about what is expected from something (or someone) to be labeled “beautiful”, and this has been leading me to think past of judgments on women, onto what beauty might mean in reference to fine art concentrations and materials.

5. SUMMATION

Fascination in trickery has lead me down a long, investigatory path towards how people read my work, and the practice of it has led me to gain the ability to play with what someone can call a sculpture or a painting. Along the way I have run into endless questions throughout art history and traditional applications of media, to confuse me about what is considered to be a general beauty. Fundamental philosophical history understanding supports my skeptical stance on a standard of beauty, but this unanswerable question allows for bountiful room to workout my theories through visual art.

In a recent lecture the philosopher Denis Dutton laid out his idea that beauty is nature's way of providing pleasure from a distance in a talk entitled *A Darwin theory of beauty*. It exudes pleasure by arousing and sustaining interest for survival and reproduction. As this translates easily into modern day through human's physical beauty, Dutton also carries this theory into the arts by stating; "We find beauty in something that is done well... not in the eye of the beholder".⁷ Here I have come across a theory that people fundamentally appreciate something that gives them pleasure through vision, and yet I am still confused by certain traits that this culture deems appropriate or "sexy". If that overweight woman, crammed into her tube top, feeding her toddler pixie sticks so she will

⁷ Dutton, Denis. "A Darwinian theory of beauty." Filmed February 2010. TED video, 15:34. Posted November 2010.
http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/en/denis_dutton_a_darwinian_theory_of_beauty.html

smile big while parading around in full makeup is socially appropriate, to the point where it has become an organized “sport” with regulations and standards, then how am I supposed to set guidelines within my sculptural/painting practice? The point, I suppose, is that I do not wish for those rules and standards. I find excitement in the experimentation and leniency where I can dance around within my pieces.

Solid artwork is about questioning, and my questions stem from categorizations of so-called “norms”. I am thrilled to be baffled by what Middle America finds appropriate for their children, while at the same time frightened by what is valued as most important in these people’s lives. I draw similarities from these problems into dialogue about what has come to be expected in sculptural categories, borrowing cheap materials from these people’s norms to frustrate art history’s standards. Although this investigation is allowing for me to delve into my art making whole-heartedly, I realize I am merely skimming the surface of this dilemma in the scope of the contemporary art world amongst my peers. I understand, as Rosalind Krauss stated over thirty years ago, that “Nothing, it would seem, could possibly give to such a motley of effort the right to lay claim to whatever one might mean by the category of sculpture. Unless, that is, the category can be made to become almost infinitely malleable”.⁸

⁸ Krauss, Rosalind. “Sculpture in the Expanded Field.” *October*, volume 8, (Spring 1979): 30-44. p 30

I do not attempt to forge a breakthrough in the field of sculpture; rather, I aim to simply question obvious definitions and what has been allowed to become acceptable in our culture with a sense of humor to support it. My artwork will thrive in its role amongst my peers to point out ridiculous examples of “standards” and exploit them. Like the current exhibition at the New Museum, NY, my work

“...suggests dark humor about this inheritance and the nonsentimental, noncynical approaches to history and survival it requires. Lingering in the present, artists in the exhibition embrace temporality and impermanence to explore new contingencies for an unknown future. ‘The Ungovernables,’ then, is about rejecting incorporation and monetization, recognizing heat, transforming potential, and offering possibilities while maintaining self-awareness, humility, and humor.”⁹

⁹ Joo, Eungie. “The Ungovernables.” *The Ungovernables: 2012 New Museum Triennial, February 15-April 22, 2012*, New York, NY: Skira Rizzoli Publications, Inc., 2012. p 16



Figure 1

Museum of Jurassic Technology: display

Mice on toast and mice pie cures bed-wetting, incontinence and stuttering
1987



Figure 2

Kelly O'Brien

Self Portrait as Jackalope

2008

Cast iron, polymer clay, special effects make-up, glass eyes, antlers and fishing line

30"x30"x12"

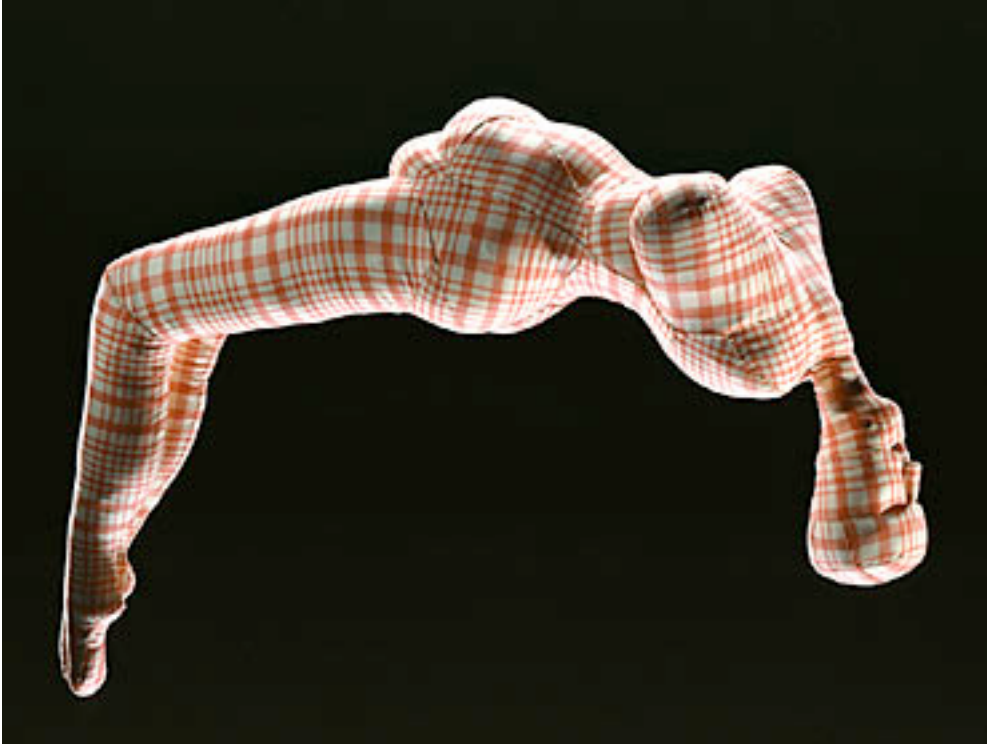


Figure 3

Louise Bourgeois
Arched Figure
2004
Fabric
14"x30"x8"



Figure 4

Kelly O'Brien

Mounted Fancy Calf

2008

Wood, deer skull, liquid gold, glass eyes, rhinestones, cheesecloth, resin and polymer clay

12"x8"x6"



Figure 5

Mitzi Pederson

yellow and orange

2006

Cinder blocks, wood, glitter, glue, cellophane and aluminum tape



Figure 6

Angela de la Cruz
Larger Than Life
2004
Oil and Acrylic on Canvas
260 x 400 x 1050 cm



Figure 7

The Learning Chanel

Toddlers & Tiaras

2009

Photograph by Rebecca Drobis



Figure 8

Kelly O'Brien
Awkward Glitz
2011

Spandex, glitter, nylon, resin, polyester stuffing and plywood
68"x20"x65"



Figure 9

Kelly O'Brien
Purple Portrait
2012

Oil Paint, spandex, eyelashes, Bondo, tape, polyester stuffing and plywood
18"x6"x42"



Figure 10

Kelly O'Brien

Sculpture to Painting Blob Prop

2012

Spandex, nylon, snaps, latex and oil paint, and plywood

Dimensions Variable



Figure 11

Kelly O'Brien
Tube Top Glitz
2012
Oil Paint, spandex, tape, and pine
58"x31"x6"



Figure 12

Kelly O'Brien

Group Glitz

2011

Spandex, glitter, nylon, resin, polyester stuffing and plywood

Dimensions Variable



Figure 13

Kelly O'Brien
Purple Blob Prop (front and back views)
2012
Spandex, nylon, snaps, latex paint and plywood
40"x52"x36"



Figure 14

Kelly O'Brien

Purple Glitz

2011

Spandex, glitter, nylon, resin, Bondo, latex paint and plywood

37"x42"x19"



Figure 15

Kelly O'Brien
Leaking Blob Prop (back view)
2012
Spandex, snaps, latex paint and plywood
12"x36"x70"



Figure 16

Kelly O'Brien

Sucked-in Paint

2012

Spandex, nylon, latex, glitter, tape, polyester stuffing and pine
62"x30"x34"

REFERENCE LIST

- “About Toddlers & Tiaras.” Publicity for *Toddlers & Tiaras*, Discovery Communications, LLC., <http://tlc.howstuffworks.com/tv/toddlers-tiaras/about-toddlers-and-tiaras.htm> .
- Cahn, Steven M. *Classics of Western Philosophy*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1977.
- Crimp, Douglas. “This is Not a Museum of Art.” In *On the Museum’s Ruins*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993.
- Dutton, Denis. “A Darwinian theory of beauty.” Filmed February 2010. TED video, 15:34. Posted November 2010. http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/en/denis_dutton_a_darwinian_theory_of_beauty.html .
- Celant, Germano. Hauser & Wirth Gallery, introduction to “Louise Bourgeois: The Fabric Works,” *Hauser & Worth London*, October 15- December 18, 2010, <http://www.hauserwirth.com/exhibitions/743/louise-bourgeois-the-fabric-works/view/> .
- Hoffmann, Jens. “Mitzi Pederson.” In *Vitamin 3-D: New Perspectives in Sculpture and Installation*, edited by Trevor Schoonmaker and Anne Ellegood, 220-223. New York, NY: Phaidon Press Inc., 2009.
- Joo, Eungie. “The Ungovernables.” *The Ungovernables: 2012 New Museum Triennial, February 15-April 22, 2012*, New York, NY: Skira Rizzoli Publications, Inc., 2012.
- Krauss, Rosalind. “Sculpture in the Expanded Field.” *October*, volume 8, (Spring 1979): 30-44.
- Morris, Robert. “Aligned with Nazca.” *ARTFORUM* 14, no. 2, (October 1975): 26-39.
- Weschler, Lawrence. *Mr. Wilson’s Cabinet of Wonder: Pronged Ants, Horned Humans, Mice on Toast, and Other Marvels of Jurassic Technology*. New York, NY: Random House, Inc., 1995.
- Williams, Gilda. “Angela de la Cruz.” In *Vitamin P: New Perspectives in Painting*, edited by Barry Schwabsky, 64-67. New York, NY: Phaidon Press Inc., 2002.